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ABSTRACT

This theme issue includes five articles that focus on educational, cognitive, and brain research with implications for early childhood educators, including those who work with limited-English-proficient, minority, and economically disadvantaged children. "Coming to Grips with Reading Instruction at the Early Grades" (Christie L. Goodman) reports research findings that address how children learn to read and outlines successful strategies for enhancing literacy development, both at school and home. "Do You Want Your Students To Be Readers? All It Takes Is 15 Minutes a Day" (Juanita Garcia, Hilaria Bauer) discusses the socio-psycho-linguistic aspects of literacy development and the "book talk" teaching strategy, which creates physical and social contexts that encourage children to read and express their opinion about what they've read. "Snapping Synapses in the Early Years" (Bradley Scott) describes research findings that a person's capacity to learn depends on an interplay between nature and nurture, and its implications for providing a good learning environment given the social problems that children face. Practices supportive of good learning environments are suggested for parents and other adults, policy makers, and schools. "Retrato de mi familia: A Portrait of My Hispanic Family" (Rebeca Maria Barrera) discusses how Hispanic family rituals are central to Hispanic culture, and presents strategies for incorporating culture into the classroom and for working with a student's whole family. "Child's Play" (Yojani Fatima Hernandez) discusses the importance of play in childhood learning, types of play, and how to promote play and encourage social interactions. "IDRA Kicks Off 25th Anniversary Celebration" gives a brief history of the Intercultural Development Research Association and its accomplishments. A sidebar presents findings from brain development research (TD)

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Celebrating 25 Years
1973-1998

IDRA Focus:
Young Children

INTERCULTURAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

IDRA Newsletter

ISSN 1069-5672 Volume XXV, No. 4 April 1998

ED 420 459

Coming to Grips with Reading Instruction at the Early Grades

Christie L. Goodman, APR

Inside this Issue:

- Strategies for quality interaction
- Brain research and Piaget
- Ideas for parents and schools
- Tips for serving bilingual children

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A lot of children cry on their first day of school. "Lynn" was one of them. But instead of sobbing that morning as she watched her mother leave, she cried that night at home.

When the day began, she hiked up the school stairs and through the tall doorways brimming with confidence and expectation. She was armed with the brand new pencils, sweet-smelling crayons and her own Big Chief tablet that had all been carefully laid out the night before. Waving to her mother outside, she disappeared into the hallway. Her father was a high school teacher, so she was familiar with the echoes of long school corridors. And she had perused the books her mother brought home. She could not wait to read the big words that described the pictures. Her parents had promised that she would learn to read in the first grade.

She found her classroom and peeped inside. There was Ms. Bray – it was her first day too. She smiled as she comforted other children. Lynn found an empty chair and climbed onto it.

The bell rang. This is it, Lynn said to herself. She was finally grown up and in school like the older kids. She was Charlie entering Willy Wonka's chocolate factory.

By the time the last bell rang, Lynn realized something was terribly wrong. Maybe Ms. Bray forgot. But the whole day had gone by and the class had not learned to read yet.

The other children did not seem to notice. They were bouncing around, thrilled they had survived their first day of school. What had seemed frightening, turned out to be fun. And best of all, the teacher was nice. They looked forward to the adventures that awaited them as they scurried to tell others about their day.

But Lynn's heart was heavy. Her bottom lip quivered. Not wanting to cause trouble, the disillusioned little girl slipped out of her seat and quietly went home.

Her six-year-old mind had expected to be reading after just one day. She would learn to read in the first grade, they had said. Well, now she had *been* to the first grade. More than sad, she was angry.

Lynn did not realize it then, but she was learning to read before that big day. Her parents had given her "pre-literacy" things to do for fun. They taught her how to hold a pencil and how to draw lines and circles that would later become letters. She had done some "reading readiness" work in kindergarten and could read a little bit of those children's books. Yet, she dreamed of reading the newspaper at the breakfast table with her father.

Instead, the next morning she ate her cereal while her parent's explanations echoed in her head. Reading is not like a light switch. Be patient. Everything will be all right.

She went back to Ms. Bray's classroom a bit wiser, though still eager.

Children Begin Learning from Birth

That little girl was me. It was the 1970s when the prevailing practice was not to rush children into schoolwork even in areas where they showed interest.

In the years since then, educators have been affirming that, although they may show it in different ways, all children are eager to learn. And researchers are discovering that

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The Intercultural Development Research Association *(IDRA)* is a non-profit organization with a 501(c)(3) tax exempt status. The purpose of the organization is to disseminate information concerning equality of educational opportunity. The *IDRA Newsletter* (ISSN 1069-5672, copyright ©1998) serves as a vehicle for communication with educators, school board members, decision-makers, parents, and the general public concerning the educational needs of all children in Texas and across the United States.

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how we tap into that eagerness in children's first few years makes a big difference in their later years in school and in life.

Last year, the President and First Lady hosted a White House conference on early education. They convened a panel of experts to spotlight exciting findings on how young children learn and develop. Using the latest imaging technology, neuroscientists have confirmed that brain development is a function of both genes and environment (see "Snapping Synapses in the Early Years" on Page 5).

In a presentation to a group of early childhood educators, Dr. Maria Robledo Montecel, IDRA executive director, responded, "Findings like these support what [educators] already knew about young children and learning:

- Children are *always* ready to learn.
- Children have a *curiosity* for learning.
- Children learn *from their environment*.
- Children thrive in an environment of *love* and *respect*.
- Children have a potential for *acquiring language*.
- Children can communicate ideas in many *different* ways.
- Children can acquire a *love* and *desire* for reading.
- Children *learn in* different ways" (1997).

Hopefully, such findings will also cause a significant response to the need for early childhood education, which has so far gone largely unnoticed.

- The Children's Defense Fund (CDF) reports that only one in seven child care centers and one in 10 family child care homes posses the quality needed to enhance children's development (1996).
- In 1993, less than one-fourth of 3- and 4-year-olds from low-income families were enrolled in early childhood programs compared to just over half of those from high-income families (CDF, 1996).
- The average reading proficiency of 12th-grade students declined significantly from 1992 to 1994 across a broad range of subgroups, based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 1994 reading report card (NAEP, 1996).

But bringing more students into early childhood classrooms will not be sufficient. There is also a need for more effective reading instruction at all levels. A positive sign is a new report from a committee of the National Research Council (NRC) that calls for widespread reforms to ensure all children are equipped with the skills and instruction they need to learn to read and comprehend.

Children Learn in Diverse and Complex Ways

The majority of reading problems faced by today's adolescents and adults could have been avoided or resolved in the early years of childhood, says the report, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*. The study was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services. The NRC is the principal operating arm of the National Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Engineering.

The report suggests that the ongoing debate over which teaching method is best has diverted attention from the most important factors affecting how a child learns to read (Snow, Burns and Griffin, 1998).

For example, the debate that has engaged generations of philosophers – whether *nature* or *nurture* calls the shots – focuses on the wrong question. Discovering how genes and the environment interact is more realistic.

"It's not a competition," says Dr. Stanley Greenspan, a psychiatrist at George Washington University. "It's a dance" (Nash, 1997).

In another example, educators have long debated whether phonics or whole language is the best method to teach reading. *Phonics* stresses teaching the relationship between letters and their sounds, and decoding words using letter sounds. *Whole language* prompts students to infer the meaning of words from the context or pictures within a story. The NRC report suggests a mix of early phonics training and whole language instruction.

"It's clear that perpetuating the pendulum swings from phonics to whole language isn't helping kids...Because reading is such a complex and multifaceted activity, no single method is the answer," said committee chair Catherine Snow, Henry Lee Shattuck Professor of Education at Harvard Graduate School of Education. "What we need to do is get beyond that... and just simply try to conceptualize what is good reading instruction, what do readers need to know and what do good readers do" (Colvin, 1998).

Success in reading builds on the same complex set of skills for all children. *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* outlines critical components of a

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Do You Want Your Students to Be Readers? All it Takes is 15 Minutes a Day

Juanita García, M.A. and Hilaria Bauer, M.A.

Successful students establish a strong bond with adults through quality interaction. According to recent studies, how well a student will do in school and eventually in society is a direct correlation to the quality interaction the student has with adults (Cummins and Krashen, 1993).

Researchers have begun to study literacy development more comprehensively than before. Literacy is not simply a cognitive skill to be learned. It is a complex socio-psycho-linguistic activity. So the social aspects of literacy development – what happens in home and community settings – is recognized as important (Teale and Sulzby, 1989).

When we reflect on our own childhood, we remember adults who spent quality time with us. These individuals may have been parents, grandparents and other family members who took time to listen to us and instill traditional values and the language through which we learned to express ourselves. These adults did not necessarily teach us how to read and write, but they did lay the socio-psycho-linguistic foundation that is necessary for literacy to emerge.

The development of literacy requires 15 minutes of quality interaction per day. So, why are so few children reading? Studies have revealed that even though we think we are providing interaction with children, we may not be providing "quality" interaction. The average U.S. child receives 27 seconds of quality interaction a day from any adult (Montaño-Harmon, 1993).

Quality interaction is direct involvement with individuals that develops cognition, language and self-esteem, and it transfers values.

Children's main sources of language input are from the home, school, peers and media. If they are not interacting with important adults in their lives, then children are receiving language input from their peers and television.

When educators say we need to develop oral language but do not structure lessons to provide these experiences, we allow for interaction but we do not provide "quality" interaction.

What is Quality Interaction?

Quality conveys the notion of "goodness" – what is good, desirable and wanted. So, *quality interaction* benefits both of the interacting parties. When you sit with a four-year-old and listen to his or her description of a picture, when you make the time to answer a six-year-old's "why" questions, and when you read a good book to a child, you are providing quality interaction.

Quality interaction is direct involvement with individuals that develops cognition, language and self-esteem, and it transfers values (Cummins and Krashen, 1993). Even at a very young age, children are able to think critically and creatively. They are able to use language to express their thoughts and know the difference between right and wrong.

Quality interaction gives children the opportunity to express ideas, explanations, emotions and findings. By articulating these expressions, children use many linguistic functions that provide the foundation for literacy.

Children's literature is a great vehicle for quality interaction because it provides the academic input children need to develop literacy. Literature is the imaginative shaping of life and thought into the forms and structures of language. Quality literature can capture the emotions, making students' encounters with reading pleasant as well as instructive (García, 1994).

The Book Talk Strategy

Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) is working with several school districts to increase the cognitive growth and academic achievement of all students, including language-minority students, through an intensive language-across-the-curriculum program. Through this reading project, known as IDRA's *Focusing on Language and Academic Instructional Renewal* (FLAIR) project, a task force of teachers and administrators at each campus analyzes its instructional program, learns and practices new strategies, evaluates success and sets goals for the next year.

The FLAIR project incorporates teaching strategies that are based on the latest research in the fields of bilingual, English as a second language (ESL) and language arts education. The strategies are grounded on three fundamental principles for teaching: *involvement*, *validation* and *guidance* (Montaño-Harmon, 1993). Students need to be *involved* in active learning strategies. Teachers look for opportunities to extract learning from students and *validate* what they know. Language is developed as students interact

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25 YEARS OF RESEARCH ON CHILDREN AND EDUCATION CAN BE REDUCED TO ONE SENTENCE:

"HOW WELL A STUDENT WILL DO IN SCHOOL AND EVENTUALLY IN OUR SOCIETY IS IN DIRECT PROPORTION TO THE QUALITY INTERACTION THAT STUDENT HAS WITH ADULTS."

– J. Cummins and S. Krashen, 1997

Upcoming Events

WOW: Workshop on Workshops

Sponsored by
Intercultural Development
Research Association

May 7-8, 1998
June 11-12, 1998
San Antonio, Texas

The registration fee of $150 per person includes the two-day training session and the WOW: Workshop on Workshops workbook. For more information, call IDRA at 210/684-8180.

Comprehensive Centers! Reading Success Network Institute

Sponsored by:
U.S. Comprehensive Regional
Assistance Centers

May 11-15, 1998
San Antonio, Texas

For more information, call IDRA at 210/684-8180.

All it Takes is 15 Minutes *- continued from page 3*

with teachers and their peers, and teachers take on the roles of *guides* and facilitators.

As IDRA educational consultants and experienced classroom teachers, we have the opportunity to work with many early childhood classrooms through the FLAIR project. As we prepare our sessions with teachers, we select strategies that provide quality interaction and lead to the development of reading. The objectives of the lessons are clear, and we design questions to generate the acquisition of a specific reading skill.

One of the most successful strategies we have used is *book talk*, where children are "invited" to explore the wonder of literature and are provided multiple avenues for reading and responding. Daily interactions are important as teachers encourage children to read and to develop and express their responses (Hickman, 1995).

In the *book talk* strategy, students select the books they want to discuss. There should be enough books to give every child an opportunity to make choices. Students are grouped according to the books they plan to read. The teacher poses questions to each group about the book's cover. After much discussion about the cover, students are asked to pair with a teammate and read the book. Responding is collaborative, so finding space for children to read, talk and work together is essential.

After about 10 minutes of paired reading, students rejoin their group and are asked higher-level inferential questions about the story. Students can share specific information about their book – as they unknowingly practice important reading skills such as making inferences, summarizing and developing opinions.

For example, we recently visited a second grade class that has fallen in love with *Jorge el Curioso* (*Curious George*). When we asked the children to talk about the stories, every child had something to tell us. Some of them even tried to persuade us to read one of the stories we had not read yet. These second graders were able to describe to us a subject they truly cared for. They were all eager to be introduced to the next story because they knew the character so well.

Teachers can use *book talk* for about 15 minutes a day during their reading block. Those who use thematic or whole language instruction can incorporate this strategy every time they want children to develop a new insight within a theme. The teacher can rotate from group to group daily and provide some quality time with each group.

This strategy deliberately creates physical and social contexts that enable children to make connections with books. The teacher sets the tone with his or her enthusiasm for reading and knowledge of the books.

This approach to literacy learning also takes into account diverse learners. It groups students heterogeneously and by their interests instead of by their ability, which most classrooms use for reading instruction. When members of a group join together, they assume different roles. In cooperative learning programs, roles are assigned to students to facilitate the group members' interaction, but when the focus is on personal response to texts, it is difficult to identify the specific roles that students may assume (Goately, Brock and Raphael, 1995).

In *book talk*, roles are not assigned. We have seen roles emerge and change as a result of students' prior knowledge of the books and group products they must produce. Young children and second language learners consistently surprise teachers by how well they respond to the strategy. They are able to work in their groups with less teacher supervision. Children make decisions and tackle texts that are above their reading levels.

Being able to derive meaning from what is read is a crucial aspect of literacy development. Equally important is the ability to explain to others the understanding, meaning, connections and interpretations readers derive. The *book talk* strategy helps students develop this capacity in ways that are engaging and enjoyable (Green, 1997).

So let us pose the question again. Do you want your students to be readers? All it takes is 15 minutes a day.

Does reading aloud make it happen? How about occasional opportunities to discuss books or fantastic story-inspired student artwork? None of these techniques alone is sufficient.

Much more is needed to create classrooms that nurture children's responses to literature. Literacy does not happen by chance. The key is you, the teacher, providing many ways for students to read and respond, taking time to listen consistently, providing positive guidance by modeling, and encouraging and redirecting just like the important people in our lives who guided us to where we are today.

Resources

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SNAPPING SYNAPSES IN THE EARLY YEARS

Bradley Scott, M.A.

Research on the development of the human brain has advanced during the last few years in ways that have substantial implications for early childhood education. The research is fascinating and compelling. The findings are a matter of national importance and interest. They affirm the value of sufficient prenatal care for mothers and infants, developmentally appropriate early childhood education and day care, and focused policy at all levels.

This article examines some of these issues by reviewing Jean Piaget's first two stages of cognitive development as a foundation for looking at some of the more interesting aspects of the latest brain research. It also suggests strategies for parents, educators and other adults for increased cognitive and academic performance of young learners.

Piaget Suggests that a Child's Early Years are Power-packed for Learning

Piaget described four stages of intellectual development in children. He called the first stage, *sensory-motor* (ages 0 to 2); the second stage, *pre-operational* (ages 2 to 7); the third stage, *concrete operational* (ages 7 to 11); and the fourth stage, *formal operational* (11 to 15, and beyond) (Labinowicz, 1980).

In the first stage, the infant is focused on a tremendous period of sensory input and coordination of physical action. While the child does not "think" in the same way older children and adults think, the child does exhibit goal-directed behavior and, with practice and repetition, begins to invent solutions to the puzzling world of which she or he is the center. Other signs of intelligence the child shows by the end of this stage are a rudimentary sense of object permanence, the cause and effect of actions, and preverbal language competencies such as basic sound discrimination, word recognition and limited language production.

In the second stage, the child develops representational thought and begins to see that things can represent other things. The child's "thinking" moves from being totally externalized to being internalized. That is, the child can think and wonder about things, question things, solve certain problems, explore in purposeful ways, imitate, play symbolically (make believe and dramatic play), imagine, and use language to talk about the world around him or her.

These two stages are power-packed. We already know that in no other time in life will children (or adults) do as much learning as they do during these periods. For this reason, Piaget advocates exploratory, self-initiated, student-centered learning experiences to further cognitive growth and development. His point is not that some children will grow through the various stages while others will not. All children grow through these stages. His point is that all children go through the stages at their own pace.

Findings About the Human Brain Expand Piaget's Theories

The latest research on the development of the human brain adds another dimension to Piaget's theories. It brings home an amazing and intriguing point. Madeleine Nash elaborates:

> Of all the discoveries that have poured out of neuroscience labs in recent years, the finding that the electrical activity of the brain cells changes the physical structure of the brain is perhaps the most breathtaking...The rhythmic firing of neurons is no longer assumed to be a by-product of building the brain but *essential to the process* [emphasis added] (1997).

It appears that the brain undergoes tremendous changes during the first years of life. The millions of neurons (nerve cells) in a baby's brain begin producing trillions of electrical connections (*synapses*) that literally are the basis for brain power. The more synapses, the more brain power.

Research also reveals that if these connections are used, they become stronger. If they are not used, they atrophy – or shrivel up and fall off. Nash states, "By the age of two, a child's brain contains twice as many synapses and consumes twice as much energy as the brain of a normal adult" (1997).

A 2-year-old is bursting to experience, build connections, be stimulated, take in the world – in other words, to learn. Cognition, language, emotions and the full range of being and becoming are on the verge of explosion into enlightenment, growth and

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DID YOU KNOW?

IN 1995, HEAD START SERVED 752,000 CHILDREN, WHICH IS ONLY ABOUT ONE-THIRD OF THOSE WHO ARE ELIGIBLE.

– Children's Defense Fund, 1996

IN 1993, LESS THAN ONE-FOURTH OF THREE- AND FOUR-YEAR-OLDS FROM LOW-INCOME FAMILIES WERE ENROLLED IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION COMPARED TO JUST OVER HALF OF THOSE FROM HIGH-INCOME FAMILIES.

National Center for Education Statistics, 1996

ONLY ONE IN SEVEN CHILD CARE CENTERS AND ONE IN 10 FAMILY CHILD CARE HOMES POSSES THE QUALITY NEEDED TO ENHANCE CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT.

– Children's Defense Fund, 1996

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development provided that people within the environment take advantage of the opportunity to nurture the child through rich experiences, interactions, opportunities for exploration, discovery and revelation.

Growth and development will occur for all children, as Piaget noted. But we are beginning to better understand that the quality of that development can be affected and altered by the quality of the environment that is created for nurturing growth and development.

James Collins states:

> Proper brain development is a matter of genetics and nutrition and whether the mother-to-be drinks or smokes, but is also depends on the stimuli…that a baby receives. It depends on what the baby sees, hears and touches and on the emotions he or she repeatedly experiences (1997).

Collins goes on to report that many scientists believe there are critical "windows of opportunity" in the first few years of childhood where the brain needs certain types of experiential input to stabilize certain long-lasting neurological structures for learning.

Of course learning occurs throughout life, but the brain's heightened capacity for learning occurs in a way during the first years of life that will not be seen again. In fact, neuroscientists have now confirmed that the brain's greatest growth spurt draws to a close around the age of 10, with the most powerful spurts occurring during the preschool ages.

In a report entitled *Rethinking the Brain: New Insights into Early Learning*, Rima Shore points out the following three findings from research on the development of the human brain (1997).

- An individual's capacity to learn and to thrive depends on an *interplay* between nature and nurture. It is not *either/or*; it is *and*.
- Across all racial and ethnic groups, the human brain is uniquely constructed to benefit from good teaching, particularly during the first years.
- Although learning takes place throughout the life cycle, the greatest opportunities and greatest risks occur during the first years of life.

Shore talks about the delicate balance between the old nature vs. nurture debate:

> To be sure, genes play an important role, endowing every individual with a particular set of predispositions…But they [geneticists] acknowledge that genetic endowment is only part of the equation; it is the dynamic relationship between nature and nurture that shapes human development. All of this evidence – and a great deal more that is beyond the scope of this report – leads to a single conclusion: How humans develop and learn depends critically and continually on the interplay between nature (an individual's genetic endowment) and nurture (the nutrition, surroundings, care, stimulation and teaching that are provided or withheld)… Both factors are crucial. New knowledge about brain development should end the "nature or nurture" debate once and for all (1997).

GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT WILL OCCUR FOR ALL CHILDREN, AS PIAGET NOTED. BUT WE ARE BEGINNING TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THAT THE QUALITY OF THAT DEVELOPMENT CAN BE AFFECTED AND ALTERED BY THE QUALITY OF THE ENVIRONMENT THAT IS CREATED FOR NURTURING GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT.

Collins poses a question that I would like to provide at least a partial answer. He says that if environment matters, we are faced with a dilemma: "At a time when children suffer perhaps the gravest social problems of any group in the United States, how do we ensure that they grow up in the best environment possible?" (1997).

This question must be dealt with in three areas: practices of parents (and other adults), practices of policy-makers and practices in schools.

Practices of Parents (and Other Adults)

As children's first teachers, parents and other adults who interact with children must do the following to ensure the best possible environment for learning.

- Build strong supportive relationships with children that reflect love, unconditional regard, acceptance, respect and genuine interaction.
- Provide hundreds of opportunities for active hands-on experimentation, exploration, discovery and questioning.
- Talk to children and engage them in discussions where listening, questioning and reflection are the rule not the exception.
- Use everyday objects, materials and items in the environment for inquiry and discovery.
- Support risk-taking in a safe environment that encourages trying, trying and succeeding and failing and trying again.
- Protect and guard children from hurt, abuse, neglect, and emotional stress and trauma.
- Seek help and learn how to ask for help when you (parents and other adults) cannot do what is suggested by the previous practices.
- Be accountable for doing everything possible to unlock the world for children and insist that other adults around children similarly commit themselves to the same purposes and goals.

Practices of Policy-makers

As children's benefactors, policy-makers at all levels must do the following to ensure the best possible environment for learning.

- Create an environment that supports success for children's learning, which requires appropriate resources of all types including qualified people; adequate financial backing; and clearly articulated and thoughtfully planned, implemented and administered programs that reflect high standards and genuine, authentic procedures for accountability.
- Provide the necessary vision that best supports children's appropriate growth and successful development and that embraces what is known from research that supports children's learning, achieving and excelling in their homes, neighborhoods, schools and communities.
- Be accountable for structuring legislation, regulation, administrative codes and practices that reflect what is known about how children learn.
- Value the welfare of children and their families above your own interests, political desires and personal ego.
- Operate at all levels with the best interest of children and their families as a matter of national priority.
- Support continued scientific research on brain development and early learning. Support translation of that research into institutional practices such as teacher training and preparation at universities

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WOW: Workshop On Workshops

May 7-8, 1998
The Center at IDRA
San Antonio, Texas

June 11-12, 1998
The Center at IDRA
San Antonio, Texas

This two-day experience spurs participants to become **more effective presenters**. The workshop uses an experience-based model that has practical application for you in your job. Current, research-based principles provide a context for participants to collaborate in creating informative, practical and engaging presentations. The *WOW* is **highly participatory** and directly addresses participants' needs and challenges. During the *WOW*, participants will:

- Experience a **complete process** for planning and conducting workshops.
- Review **principles of adult learning**.
- Contrast **needs assessment** approaches.
- Write and refine workshop **objectives**.
- Design innovative **activities**.
- Practice and **expand facilitation skills**.
- **Network** with other professionals.

The *WOW* is facilitated by Aurelio Montemayor, M.Ed., lead trainer in IDRA's Division of Professional Development and creator of the highly popular *WOW*. With more than 25 years of professional training experience, he can teach your staff or group the techniques every trainer needs to conduct meaningful workshops!

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To schedule a WOW for your group, call Rogelio López del Bosque or Aurelio Montemayor, 210 684-8180.

Snapping Synapses - continued from page 6

and colleges, parental involvement and skills development training programs and centers, and social service delivery programs – including prenatal, neonatal and early intervention services.

- Achieve full funding of Head Start and other such programs at the federal, state and local levels to ensure that all children – regardless of their race, sex, national origin or economic circumstance – are reared in environments that support strong growth and development.
- Provide adequate numbers of infant and toddler programs that support enriched environmental learning experiences for all children from birth.

Practices in Schools

Shore offers parents some broad guidelines for young children's care and school readiness based upon the research on early brain development (1997). The guidelines are offered below for educators along with the parenthetical expansion that I have provided.

- Ensure health, safety and good nutrition. (Immunizations; child-proof environments; safe places for exploring, experiencing and learning; and well-balanced meals are among the most important building blocks for success.)
- Develop warm, caring relationships with children. (The power of attachments and relationships and the impact upon a child's ability to learn are clearly documented.)
- Respond to children's cues and clues. (For example, respond to children's rhythms, moods and feelings.)
- Recognize and embrace the uniqueness of each child. (This includes the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and social uniqueness of the child. Such uniqueness should help educators to structure flexible, adaptive environments for children's exploration and discovery.)
- Talk, read and sing to children. (Surround children with language, stimulation and sensory experiences.)
- Encourage safe exploration and play. (Remember that play is children's work. Neuroscientists are finding that play builds brain power.)
- Use discipline to teach. (Actions lead to consequences. Behaviors affect us and others.)
- Establish routines. (Predictability and routine become a springboard for practice. Practice helps to solidify long-lasting cognitive structures.)
- Limit television. (Also limit other passive pastimes. Remember that active, interactive experiences are what help to create those synapses that are the basis for long-lasting cognitive growth.)

The latest advancements in research on the development of the human brain in the early years is exciting and is potentially the most compelling reason for policy-makers, public school personnel, parents and others to rethink what we are really doing to support children coming to school "ready to learn" (the first national goal for education).

Are we really creating environments that nurture young children and their cognitive development? Are we doing so in all communities, in all schools and within all families regardless of their diverse characteristics? Are all children being presented with environmental experiences that snap those neurons together to produce learning webs?

I think not. Yet, a portion of the answer is right at our finger tips according to the latest brain research. We need to help make more connections.

Resources

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REFLECTIONS

Rebeca Maria Barrera, M.A.

RETRATO DE MI FAMILIA
A PORTRAIT OF MY HISPANIC FAMILY

"*Vente mi hijita*, say hello to your grandmother first. Now give your *tia* a big hug."

I remember the Sunday rituals so clearly. Sunday was family day, and we visited relatives. It was always this way, with the younger members going to the older one's home – never the other way around. Of course, we were visited occasionally, but never for the Sunday gatherings.

I looked forward to playing with my 10 cousins. We would walk in the front door and smell *caldo* cooking on the stove or *carne asada* being grilled on a fire outside, and our cousins would call us into the kitchen to taste the first hot corn tortilla, sprinkled with salt and rolled into a flute. We never made it past the living room before the *tias* caught us for the dreaded ritual – one hug and one kiss per aunt, or neighbor or friend of an aunt. They were no ordinary aunts. They were the five great aunts of the family, the sisters of my grandmother. Greeting them first was obligatory, and it took forever. In Spanish, we had to detail how we were doing in school, whether we were giving our parents the respect they merited, why our hair was in a pony tail instead of braids, or why we had fought with our brother. They always knew everything, and the interview made me squirm every time. Tia Elia was the best, though. She usually had a plate of her special muffins, and she always told me I was pretty.

Finally allowed to go outside, we would cluster around the men at the barbecue pit and listen to their stories about cattle, farming conditions and wildlife around the ranch. If it was someone's birthday, we broke a *piñata*. Before we ate, everyone sampled the food, snitching a taste here and a tortilla there. Lavish compliments were declared of all the cooks, and everyone helped set the table, including the little ones who carried napkins to each place.

Looking back on these events today, I realize how they capture the essence of our Mexican American heritage. Beginnings and endings are ritualized in our very large families. When a child is born or is baptized and when a wedding or birthday takes place everyone gathers. The family members bestow their blessings and good wishes personally. Each person has a stake in the life of the celebrated member. This tradition follows throughout life.

Culture is a Family Portrait

These memories, while not obviously early childhood related, are in fact the core of living in a Hispanic family. The interdependence of family members is so essential to family living that, without it, individual members will not thrive. Today's barrio youth coming from unstable families need to feel they belong. They join gangs in unprecedented numbers to find the bonding they long for. The need exists also in the preschool environment, where rituals are necessary for children to feel they are welcome and belong.

Culture may be superficially represented by holidays, food and music. But the deep culture is the one that really counts, and it is the most difficult for a non-member of the culture to understand. My family's rituals at mealtime, the greetings and good-byes, are all distinctly Hispanic.

Ideas for the Classroom

Making the classroom a comfortable place for children requires incorporating their culture – some of their family rituals and traditions – into the classroom environment. Here are some ideas.

Learn to pronounce Spanish names. Help children develop pride in their names and their Spanish meanings. Many Hispanics allow others to change the pronunciation of their names because it is easier than having to correct mispronunciation. Experience shows that persons who readily give up the correct pronunciation of their own names generally have become acculturated and have lost their identity with their home culture. It is important to maintain a balance between Hispanic and dominant U.S. cultures. Overacculturation separates children from their elders to whom they can no longer relate comfortably. Mispronunciation of the name is a sign that this has occurred.

Establish rituals for greetings and departures. Ask children how to acknowledge persons who come to the door, especially older persons. In my family, children would always greet each other's parents and each other.

Begin the morning each day with a review of home activities from the night before. Talking about common family experiences is an excellent self-esteem activity.

Let the children work in cooperative play most of the day. They are accustomed to being in groups. While Hispanic children need some time for individual work, many will consider it a punishment to be separated from the group.

Create opportunities for multi-age groupings. Children in Hispanic families have roles and responsibilities for younger siblings. They are not accustomed to being separated by ages, and the interaction between age groups is essential for normal family care. In multi-age classrooms, older children develop caring skills for younger children. The younger children get more personal attention and look up to role models. Modeling becomes a practical strategy for learning new skills. Family interdependence and responsibility for each other

Retrato De Mi Familia *- continued on page 9*

Retrato De Mi Familia - continued from page 8
is reinforced.

Plan longer mealtimes. Sitting at the table and talking is an essential social skill for families. Without an opportunity to practice, children lose the patience and interest needed to sit after finishing their meal.

Set up nap mats so that children can whisper to each other until they fall asleep. Children may need to be able to reach out and touch each other at naptime. Sometimes teachers confuse this with misbehavior. By emphasizing separation, the teacher may be inadvertently creating anxiety problems.

Teach children to maintain the classroom together. When a child leaves blocks on the floor, instead of demanding to know who left the blocks and standing over the culprit until the task is complete, ask several children to help clean up. Another day, that child will help the others clean up. Eventually they will monitor each other.

Expect children to want to be involved in "your business." At home, many Hispanic children participate in most activities. They may be accustomed to attending adult dinners, sports events, weddings, funerals and even going to work with their parents. At the end of the month, many children accompany their parents from the telephone company to the doctor's office to pay bills. They will feel discounted if they are told something is for adults only. Handle this gently but set limits.

Use storytelling as a tool to change behavior or teach a lesson. To get a point across, Hispanic family elders usually intersperse *dichos* and stories in their conversation. *Dichos*, or sayings, are found in most cultures and carry vital messages about social behavior, values and societal rules.

Gather materials from the home to incorporate into classroom activities. Some examples are: wooden *molinillo* for whipping hot chocolate; *tortilla* press and rolling pins for cooking activities; *molcajete* to grind corn or mash avocados into guacamole; herbs and spices for smelling activities; tiaras, hats, flower bouquets and *quinceañera* veils for dramatic play; guitar, *maracas*, *conga* drums and other rhythm instruments; Mexican coins for sorting; family photos; records and tapes with contemporary *Tejano*, *salsa* or *cumbia* music; *piñatas*, *baleros* and other toy items; ceramic tiles and tile patterns to match or assemble like a puzzle; straw baskets; and *arpilleras*, weavings and other traditional artwork.

Ideas for Working with Families

Working with the whole family is essential when working with Hispanic children. Building bridges between home and school is necessary in order to understand the uniqueness of the culture. Here are some suggestions.

Plan for the whole family to come to parent night. Child care is essential if you want adult-only discussions, otherwise expect the children to want to sit with their parents. Grandmothers or other relatives will accompany parents.

Interview parents to explore their deep culture. Ask about special days or traditions. Find out how parents guide behavior. Discuss rewards and how the family recognizes special achievement. Inquire about rites of passage such as taking the first step or losing the first tooth. Inquire about family events. Children will talk about an event for weeks before it occurs. This is part of the normal family preparation for a birth, celebration or holiday. Also expect a repeat of the story after the event occurs.

Try to have food with school events. Family box suppers or pot luck dinners are ideal. Food may indicate hospitality and create a feeling of being welcomed.

Be very conscious of age. Remember that older persons are revered in Hispanic culture. A grandmother visiting the school has more "presence" than the mother. Never make conversation that does not include both persons.

Expect the unexpected. There are many things that are personal to families and their ancient cultures. A comment about *curanderos* (herb healers) is not a suggestion of witchcraft or satanic worship. In past centuries, there were no medical doctors, and the scientists of the village were the persons who understood the medicinal value of certain tea leaves or spices. Avoid making judgments about home remedies.

Use storytelling to build bridges. Ask family members to tell stories about their families. These adventures will be much more relevant than some contemporary picture books. Children need both. Do not be surprised if some of the these include how the family arrived in the United States or how the family's land was acquired by the expanding United States. There may be painful legends and stories in the family's history.

¿Cuál Idioma?

Although this article focuses on the cultural issues, the question of language must not be separated from culture. Teachers and directors who are bilingual will know that there are formal and informal ways to communicate with parents and that the use of one form

Retrato De Mi Familia - continued on page 10

COMING UP!

In May, the
IDRA Newsletter
focuses on equity.

Retrato De Mi Familia - *continued from page 9*

implies intimacy and the other implies distance.

There are different words for the same item among Cubans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans and Spaniards. The variations are even greater when Central American or South American indigenous languages are mixed. Speaking Spanish may not be enough. Learning the regional differences will become more important as we move toward a global perspective.

Despedida

While it is important to teach children about other cultures, this is not the same thing as a culturally-relevant classroom. Other cultures are frequently introduced as a theme to be studied – like plants, transportation or rivers. But, a teacher who *incorporates* words and culture from the child's home into the classroom environment is doing much more.

The acceptance of the child's heritage builds a comfort zone; and it releases the talents, skills and knowledge hidden by the blanket of another culture. The culturally-sensitive environment empowers the child to succeed in ways we hope will reverse the high dropout rates among Hispanics.

We can all benefit from the freedom we gain as we explore our deepest feelings and values and use the positive energy in our classrooms. As we pass culture to the next generation, we know that some things are lost in the wake of technological advances and mobility. Perhaps the children will remember them through the stories they hear from us.

Rebeca Maria Barrera, M.A., is president of the National Latino Children's Institute, a national non-profit organization that promotes the healthy and complete development of Latino children and a better understanding of Latino heritage, culture and history and of the issues and challenges facing young Latinos in the United States. This article is reprinted with permission from Child Care Information Exchange (March 1993), PO Box 2890, Redmond, Washington 98073 (1-800-221-2864).

An IDRA Best Seller!

Starting Today . . .

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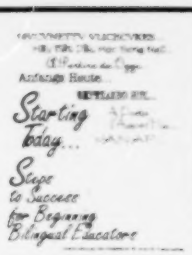

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Teaching Content:
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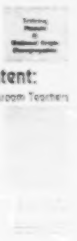
by Frank Gonzales, Ph.D.



This training module is designed for trainers to assist classroom teachers to modify their teaching strategies to serve language-minority students. Use this tool to familiarize participants with the linguistic and cognitive needs of language-minority students in the content area classroom. Help teachers acquire strategies that allow language-minority students to participate successfully in the content area classroom. Participants can also experience science, mathematics and social studies hands-on activities that incorporate strategies appropriate for language-minority students. This 58-page module comes with session outlines, a pre post test, and handout and transparency masters (ISBN 1-878550-56-X; 1995 Revised).

Recognizing Cultural Differences in the Classroom
by Frank Gonzales, Ph.D.

This training module is designed for trainers to familiarize classroom teachers with cultural elements that some national origin minority populations may bring to the school environment. Use this tool to help participants define culture and the categories of culture. Participants can become familiar with elements of *surface culture* and *deep culture* from several ethnic groups. Participants can also generate ideas for validating the culture of their students. This 47-page module comes with session outlines, a pre post test, and handout and transparency masters (ISBN 1-878550-62-4; 1996 Revised).

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Yojani Fatima Hernández

When the childless artist and poet William Blake observed a group of children playing in London's Fountain Court, he exclaimed, "That is heaven!"

When we think of happy children we usually do not envision children watching television or sitting still at a desk. We usually visualize children playing.

Parents in the 18th century generally insisted that play, along with affectionate behavior, be abandoned as early as age seven. Only recently have we discovered that asking a child to sit still at a desk to work may be counterproductive. The educational value of play is being recognized as a necessity to support learning.

Still, many early childhood educators feel their responsibility is to prepare children for the challenges of serious learning, only to find it impossible to get young children to sit still and pay attention.

The appropriate response to this dilemma is to adjust teaching techniques to include methods that are developmentally appropriate for young children. Other teachers are demonstrating the importance of play in the lives of young children and are making use of it for educating.

Foyle, Lyman and Thies state that play is a major vehicle for enabling children to learn about their world (1991). They describe play as a "channel for exploring, for testing the limits of their environment, for engaging their minds in new patterns of thought, and for devising alternative actions" (Foyle, Lyman and Thies, 1991).

During play, children express ideas and feelings, conduct new knowledge and develop oral language skills as they interact with objects and the people around them. The National Center for Research and Education Learning believes that play provides opportunities for exploration, experimentation and manipulation that are essential for constructing knowledge (Bredekamp, et al., 1992). Children can examine and refine their learning in light of the feedback they receive from the environment and other people. It is through play that children develop their imaginations and creativity.

Children construct meaning from their experiences. The work of Piaget and Vygotsky posits that development occurs as a result of the child constructing meanings through interaction with the environment

DURING PLAY, CHILDREN EXPRESS IDEAS AND FEELINGS, CONDUCT NEW KNOWLEDGE AND DEVELOP ORAL LANGUAGE SKILLS AS THEY INTERACT WITH OBJECTS AND THE PEOPLE AROUND THEM.

(McCollum, 1994). Essentially children learn what they experience.

Consider children involved in dramatic play. They create their own scenarios, decide who their characters are going to be and how they will interact with each other, and decide the final outcome of their play. These are the foundations of understanding reading.

Play is the vehicle for learning. Children answer a myriad of questions through play.

> Consider the girl who ventured to the top of the monkey bars. She calls to you *"Mira que alto llegue!* [Look how high I got!]" She questions herself on whether she can do it, she starts climbing to test this and finally she finds her answer: She does it! (Bauer, 1996).

Hence, play provides the setting for experimentation and literacy.

During the primary school grades, children's play becomes more rule-oriented and promotes the development of autonomy and cooperation. This contributes to social, emotional and intellectual development. Children need years of play with real objects and events before they are able to understand the meaning of symbols such as letters and numbers (Bredekamp, 1987).

Play serves important functions in children's physical, language, mental and social development. For example, in order to ensure the physical development of 4- and 5-year-olds, it is important to utilize drawing, painting and cutting with blunt scissors. Playtime is very active for these youngsters, so climbing, jumping and swinging on the playground are active ways of enhancing their physical development. Essentially, young children have high levels of energy and must be allowed to express their energy in order to have a healthy period of physical development.

To encourage language development in young children between the ages of 3 and 5, teachers can have children repeat a story they have heard and can tell them interactive stories. They can include in their curriculum singing, playing singing games, rhymes, dancing, dramatic play, acting out stories and imitating family members or friends. Children resort to physical means of communication sometimes because they do not have the verbal skills to express frustration and other feelings. Thus, playing is an important part of children's learning how to interact with their environment.

Some principles have emerged as common denominators in the study of play. These include the following (Foyle, Lyman and Thies, 1991).

- Play should be child-directed, child-initiated and child-involved.
- Play should be autonomous of external goals.
- Play occurs when a child feels secure and his or her basic needs are met.
- Play is fun.
- Play supports and enhances all areas of development.

Types of play include *sensory-motor play, pretend play* and *games with rules*. Sensory-motor play is the experimentation by infants and toddlers with bodily sensation and motor movements and with objects and people. During this motor-oriented play stage (from infancy to approximately 2 years of age), children practice and refine motor skills and are self-involved and egocentric in their behavior. This type of isolated play enables children to separate themselves from their surroundings and recognize their actions as affecting events in their world.

For example, infants will push and grab objects to make interesting things happen. Older infants will push a ball and crawl after it. At about age 2, a toddler will become aware of the way objects function in the social world.

Pretend play is a complex type of play that involves children carrying out action plans, taking on roles and transforming objects as they express their ideas and feelings about their environment (Garvey, 1984). During this stage (from age 3 to 5), pretend play becomes a prominent activity.

For example, family roles such as mother, father and baby are popular and are integrated into elaborate play with themes

Child's Play - continued on page 12

Child's Play - continued from page 11

related to familiar home activities. Children also begin to take on other character roles such as nurses and pilots as well as fictional roles drawn from books and television (Fernie, 1988).

By about age 5, children become interested in formal games with peers. Games will usually involve two or more sides, competition and rules for determining a winner. These games provide children with the ability to formulate strategies and develop goals.

By encouraging autonomy and intervening only when necessary to model appropriate behavior or to stimulate conversation, an early childhood educator can promote play and enrich social interactions. The purpose is to support children and minimize adult control as much as possible so that the play process is child-initiated and child satisfying (Spodek, Saracho and Davis, 1991).

William Blake hoped the ways of children would inspire adults to rekindle the visionary flame of childhood. Today, we find incorporating play into the education of children is necessary for their physical, language, mental and social development.

Resources

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BRAIN DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH:
WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

✓ ***Human development hinges on the interplay between nature and nurture.***

The impact of environmental factors on the young child's brain development is dramatic and specific, not merely influencing the general direction of development, but actually affecting how the intricate circuitry of the human brain is "wired." How humans develop and learn depends critically and continually on the interplay between an individual's genetic endowment and the nutrition, surroundings, care, stimulation and teaching that are provided or withheld.

✓ ***Evidence amassed by neuroscientists and child development experts over the last decade point to the wisdom and efficacy of prevention and early intervention.***

Well designed programs created to promote healthy cognitive, emotional and social development can improve the prospects – and the quality of life – of many children. The efficacy of early intervention has been demonstrated and replicated in diverse communities across the nation.

✓ ***Early care has decisive and long-lasting effects on how people develop and learn, how they cope with stress and how they regulate their own emotions.***

Warm and responsive early care helps babies thrive and plays a vital role in healthy development. A child's capacity to control his or her own emotional state appears to hinge on biological systems shaped by his or her early experiences and attachments. A strong, secure attachment to a nurturing adult can have a protective biological function, helping a growing child withstand the ordinary stress of daily life.

✓ ***The human brain has a remarkable capacity to change, but timing is crucial.***

The brain itself can be altered – or helped to compensate for problems – with appropriately timed, intensive intervention. In the first decade of life, the brain's ability to change and compensate is especially remarkable. There are optimal periods of opportunity – "prime times" during which the brain is particularly efficient at specific types of learning.

✓ ***The brain's plasticity also means that there are times when negative experiences or the absence of appropriate stimulation are more likely to have serious and sustained effects.***

Early exposure to nicotine, alcohol and drugs may have even more harmful and long lasting effects on young children than was previously suspected. These risk factors frequently are associated with or exacerbated by poverty. For children growing up in poverty, economic deprivation affects their nutrition, access to medical care, the safety and predictability of their physical environment, the level of family stress, and the quality and continuity of their day-to-day care.

Research taken from "Rethinking the Brain – New Insights into Early Development," *Conference Report – Brain Development in Young Children: New Frontiers for Research, Policy and Practice*, organized by the Families and Work Institute, June 1996 (Internet posting by National Association for the Education of Young Children).

Coming to Grips – continued from page 2

child's education from birth through third grade. Children who have successfully learned to read by elementary school have mastered three skills: they understand that letters of the alphabet represent word sounds, they are able to read for meaning, and they read fluently. Disruption of any of these components can throw off a child's development and could lead to difficulties that ultimately will reduce the chances that the child will finish high school, get a job or become an informed citizen (Snow, Burns and Griffin, 1998).

Prepared by a panel that included psychologists and neurobiologists as well as educators, the 344-page NRC report describes that reading problems are disproportionately high among minority students, non-English-speaking children and those who grow up in poor or urban environments.

A particularly thorny concern has centered on how to educate children whose first language is not English. In addition to considering the reading implications of using two languages, teachers must adjust the language of instruction accordingly to ensure that reading occurs in the student's stronger language.

The NRC report attests that children should first learn the skills of reading in their initial language – the language in which they will best be able to discern the meaning of words and of sentences. If such instruction is not feasible in a given school system, the child should not be rushed prematurely into English reading instruction, but should be given an opportunity to develop a reasonable level of oral proficiency in English before learning to read (Snow, Burns and Griffin, 1998).

Because major responsibility for preventing reading difficulties is borne by early childhood educators and elementary school teachers, it is critical that they are sufficiently trained for the task. The report states, "Children need language-rich preschool opportunities, and teachers need better preparation and support to be able to guide students through the complex mix of skills that go into learning to read" (NRC, 1998).

However, many teachers are not adequately prepared, the report says. Many practitioners dealing with children under the age of eight need better training in reading development. Primary school teachers need ongoing professional development and continuing opportunities for mentoring and collaborating with reading specialists. Local school officials need to improve their staff development opportunities, which are often weakened by a lack of substantive, research-based content and systematic follow-up (NRC, 1998).

TEACHERS KNOW THAT CHILDREN LEARN TO READ IN DIVERSE AND COMPLEX WAYS. CONSEQUENTLY, TEACHERS MUST MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS BASED ON CURRENT READING RESEARCH AND DESIGN METHODS THAT BEST SERVE THEIR STUDENTS.

Teachers know that children learn to read in diverse and complex ways. Consequently, teachers must make informed decisions based on current reading research and design methods that best serve their students. Thus, they must have access to the latest research and methodology.

In a statement responding to the NRC report, Secretary of Education Richard Riley said:

> The council's findings send the nation's parents and educators a clear signal that we need to move beyond the contentious reading debate in some communities and focus on how children learn to read. I hope this report will help end the reading wars and focus America's schools on what works in teaching reading (1998).

Such a focus will involve restructuring the way many schools operate.

Keys to Success

Children come to school with diverse experiences where reading and writing are "normal" extensions of the language development process. Teachers must adjust instruction accordingly without leaving anyone behind. School structures must provide supportive environments for this to occur.

This is no small task, but there are great models of child-centered programs that are working. Participants in the Fifth Annual IDRA *La Semana del Niño* Early Childhood Educators' Institute this month will see some of them in practice. They will travel to high-performing, high-minority sites in the San Antonio area that are effectively working with diverse learners. These include Head Start classrooms, a bilingual cluster school, a dual language bilingual program and technology-integrated classrooms.

Through IDRA's *La Semana del Niño* Early Childhood Educators' Institutes during the last five years, hundreds of early childhood teachers, administrators and parents have learned about developments in research, reading theory and practice, restructuring early childhood education classrooms (such as multi-age settings and dual language programs) and have gathered classroom activities in reading, math, science, fine arts and play. These educators have returned to their schools garnered with new information, new resources and renewed support systems to improve how they help thousands of diverse young children learn.

The institute is sponsored by the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) and this year is held in collaboration with the University of Texas at San Antonio – Downtown. Supporting IDRA projects include the Desegregation Assistance Center – South Central Collaborative for Equity and the STAR Center (the comprehensive regional assistance center that serves Texas via a collaboration of IDRA, the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin, and RMC Research Corporation)*.

Recognizing the need for effective school models and professional development opportunities for early childhood educators that have substantial, research-based content, IDRA designed this year's institute around the theme, "The Key to Success: Developing the Love for Reading." Sessions led by practitioners who have tested strategies in the classroom will provide the latest information on language and literacy development, particularly in each of the "key" areas: classroom organization, oral language development, motor development (play and dance), parental involvement, core curriculum and assessment.

In addition, IDRA is hosting a pre-institute on literacy entitled, "Critical Issues in Reading Development." It will give teachers and administrators an in-depth view of how reading develops in young learners. Participants will analyze critical issues in reading development in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten: emergent literacy, oral language development related to reading development, appropriate literature for young readers, shared reading, how young children become readers and writers, the

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role of the native language, the role of parental engagement in the teaching process, and biliteracy as an attainable goal.

Such issues exemplify a teacher's complex task in providing the "right" opportunities for young children to develop literacy. As the research indicates, different methods work for different children at different stages in their development. Using appropriate practices results in young readers who are much better prepared for the rest of their school years and whatever they pursue afterwards.

The demands for higher literacy are increasing in our technological society. U.S. leaders including President Clinton, Secretary Riley and several governors have announced campaigns to improve reading and literacy skills among the nation's children. Foundations and agencies are sponsoring various initiatives to develop model programs and expand the body of knowledge on effective instructional strategies. Science is exploring how the brain develops literacy and how reading sharpens the mind. Educators and parents are stimulating the curiosity and imaginations of young minds.

At the same time, young children everywhere are eager to learn. And they are learning actively every day - during playtime, mealtime and classtime. They are learning to read.

Resources

Children's Defense Fund. *The State of America's Children Yearbook 1996* (Washington, D.C.: CDF, 1996).

Colvin, R.L. "Reading Report Suggests Mix of Teaching Methods," *Los Angeles Times* (March 19, 1998).

NAEP. *NAEP 1994 Reading Report Card: Findings from the National Assessment of Educational Progress*, Internet posting (March 1996).

Nash, J.M. "Fertile Minds," *Time* (February 3, 1997).

NRC. "Reforms Needed to Improve Children's Reading Skills," news release (Washington, D.C.: National Research Council, March 1998).

Riley, R.W. Statement Regarding National Research Council Report on *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, March 18, 1998).

Robledo Montecel, M. "Opening Windows: The Importance of Educating Young Children," presentation at the Fourth Annual IDRA *La Semana del Niño* Early Childhood Educators' Institute (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, April 1997).

Snow, C., M.S. Burns and P. Griffin (Eds.). *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1998).

** Each of these IDRA projects provides specialized training and technical assistance to public schools. Information on how your campus can use these resources to improve instruction and assessment will be available at the institute and may also be obtained by calling IDRA at 210/684-8180 or by visiting IDRA's web site (www.idra.org).*

Christie L. Goodman, APR, is the IDRA communications manager. Comments and questions may be sent to her via e-mail at idra@idra.org.

HIGHLIGHTS OF RECENT IDRA ACTIVITIES

In March, IDRA worked with **9,368** teachers, administrators and parents through **79** training and technical assistance activities and **143** program sites in **nine** states plus the United Kingdom. Topics included:

- *Validating Students' Culture in the Classroom*
- Classroom Management for Student Success
- *Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program* Youth Leadership Day
- STAR Center *Excellence and Equity through Technology* (EETNET)
- Hands-on English as a Second Language (ESL) Strategies

Participating agencies and school districts included:

- Northside Independent School District (ISD), San Antonio, Texas
- Tucson Unified School District, Arizona
- Boerne ISD, Texas
- Dallas ISD, Texas
- Gallup-McKinley Public Schools, New Mexico

Activity Snapshot

The National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE) annual conference includes several special institutes for participants to focus on a particular topic. For this year's conference in February, IDRA coordinated the two-day parent institute that was designed to gather parents from across the nation to discuss selected themes in education. More than 250 parents, educators and administrators came from 22 different states. They dealt with four major topics: parent leadership and advocacy, standards, bilingual education programs, and students' rights and parent responsibility. Parent leaders facilitated the small group discussions and led some of the general sessions. They described their own leadership development through the IDRA *Mobilization for Equity* project (funded by the Ford Foundation through the National Coalition of Advocates for Students) and the IDRA *Community Leadership for Standards-Based Reform* project (funded by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation). Many of the other parent participants have since made plans to form their own parent networks for leadership development and advocacy.

Regularly, IDRA staff provides services to:

- public school teachers
- parents
- administrators
- other decision makers in public education

Services include:

- training and technical assistance
- evaluation
- serving as expert witnesses in policy settings and court cases
- publishing research and professional papers, books, videos and curricula.

For information on IDRA services for your school district or other group, contact IDRA at 210/684-8180.

VISIT IDRA ON THE INTERNET!

IDRA is pleased to present its World Wide Web site:

http://www.idra.org

Here you will find IDRA resources, *IDRA Newsletter* articles, research results, statistics, fact sheets, policy alerts, conference information and a convenient directory of links to other sites. Jump onto your favorite browser and check us out!

IDRA's mission and areas of focus

Policy updates

Upcoming events

Professional development, programs and materials development, research and evaluation, and policy and leadership services

Collaborative programs that work for all children, including the STAR Center, Desegregation Assistance Center – South Central Collaborative for Equity, and the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program

Latest dropout statistics, a 10-year perspective on literacy and more

Text of the *IDRA Newsletter* from the last two years, indices for previous years

Descriptions of materials and how to order them

Paradigmatic views of reality

Separating fact from fiction about education

Brief staff biographies, send e-mail to a staff member

Your launching point

Search button to find what you want in IDRA's web page

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

IDRA Kicks Off 25th Anniversary Celebration

When IDRA was formed, disco, bell-bottoms, double knit and long-hair were "in," and we talked to each other using the latest CB radio technology while waiting in line for gasoline.

Now, we listen to Tejano and rap music while using the latest Internet technology to talk to each other, and on April 1, IDRA began celebrating its 25th year of working for excellence in education for all children. We are taking a little time to reflect on some of the changes we have seen since 1973 when a small group of concerned citizens set out to change the world.

People who knew that change was needed in the way schools were financed were elated in 1971 by their win in the unanimous district court ruling in *Rodriguez vs. San Antonio ISD*. The Texas system of school finance was unconstitutional.

A group of reform-minded people began meeting in San Antonio and other parts of Texas to provide leadership in the development of a comprehensive, equitable system of school finance. They formed an informal organization named Texans for Educational Excellence.

When the U.S. Supreme Court reversed the *Rodriguez* decision, Dr. José A. Cárdenas stepped down as superintendent of Edgewood Independent School District (ISD) in San Antonio and became executive director of Texans for Educational Excellence. On April 1, 1973, the organization incorporated and received its first major grant, enabling it to begin business as a full-time statewide mechanism to research and disseminate information on public school finance. Soon afterwards, the organization received tax-exempt status and formally became the Intercultural Development Research Association.

Looking back Dr. Cárdenas commented, "We intended this to be a temporary organization." The plan was to help the Texas legislature write a law that would create an equitable school finance system, monitor its implementation for a year and then make whatever revisions were necessary. Once this was achieved, IDRA would disband.

"If anyone is to credit for IDRA's continued existence for 25 years, it is the Texas legislature, because they wouldn't write that law," said Dr. Cárdenas.

During the first two years of operation, IDRA focused on school finance reform. It pioneered the identification of wealth categories and how different levels of wealth affect specific aspects of education. IDRA produced numerous publications that analyzed the system, identified problems and proposed solutions. Staff members conducted conferences and seminars to alert people of the school finance disparities and their impact as well as avenues for reform. Though never involved in a lobbying effort, IDRA was repeatedly called upon by members and committees of the Texas Legislature to provide expert information. These activities have been chronicled by Dr. Cárdenas in *Texas School Finance Reform: An IDRA Perspective*, released last year.

Since those initial years, IDRA has functioned in four areas: research and evaluation, training and technical assistance, materials development, and information dissemination. Now under the leadership of Dr. Maria "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, IDRA continues to work for school finance equity in Texas and other states as well. A new network of parents is mobilizing with IDRA's assistance to develop leadership skills and become informed advocates of excellent education for all children.

And although it has broadened its scope to include other issues related to excellence and equity in education, IDRA's vision has never changed: Making schools work for *all* children. All IDRA activities and issues of focus are measured by how they will move forward this vision.

The underlying philosophy of IDRA's vision is that "All children are valuable, none is expendable." During this anniversary year, each issue of the *IDRA Newsletter* will highlight a particular aspect of IDRA's unique philosophy of valuing – valuing children, youth, educators, families, communities and partners.

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